

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

JACK BRANCH

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Could you tell me about your experience in World War II?

I landed in Casablanca, Africa on October 22, 1943 and I went on from there to Italy and joined the 36th Division in Naples, Italy. We were taking more basic training there. A captain came down from the front one evening and said they needed some men to carry supplies to the front. I was in the bunch they picked. We moved up to the front that night and the next morning at daylight, I looked around the hill there, and that's when I saw Fletcher Burks setting there. He was combing his hair, he had pretty hair and he always thought a lot of it. I said to myself, "that's Fletcher Burks sitting there." We went in about the same time and took our training at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, but we weren't in the same outfit taking our training. We were in different companies. Anyway, we got together there in Naples. We stayed on the front there for eight days, carrying supplies, sometimes we carried them at night, and sometimes in the day time. I had seen Fletcher when we first landed in Africa, maybe a month before. We hadn't been assigned at that time to a company, not until we got to Naples, Italy. That is where we went to the front. We went to the mountains around the village of San Pietro? That's where we lost so many men, taking those mountains and that village. The weather was pretty cold too, then. Fletcher and I were both in the 36th Division, but Fletcher was in "H" company and I was in "G" company. Fletcher's "G" company was on my right and we had a British company on our left, when we were on the front. We never got to see each other then, we just knew where each other was. It was January the 21st, 1944 when we crossed the river, the Rapido River. I had a whole lot of things happen to me on the 22nd of the month. I was sworn in the service on the 22nd of April; landed overseas in Africa on the 22nd of October; captured on January 22nd.

Describe going across the Rapido River.

Both companies crossed the river the night of the 21st of January. We were going to cross the river in rubber boats, but the river was up and the water was too swift for rubber boats. So we had to wait for the engineers to lay a foot bridge. Our orders were to take the mountains on the other side of the river by hand to hand combat. They told us they didn't want to hear a shot fired. As we were crossing the river that night, the Germans were shelling us the whole time we were crossing, and we lost 4 men that night in the machine gun section that I was in. After we got across the river and in the valley, we hadn't got organized yet, and the Germans opened up on us the next morning with machine gun fire, mortar, and artillery. They pinned us down about 5:30 that morning, around daylight. Our Major had come running down through the field that morning and told us to hit the ground and dig in, that was all we could

do. We started hitting the ground and digging in. The Germans were mowing the soldiers down all around. A lot of them were calling for medics, for help. The Americans put up a pretty good battle there until about 10:30 that morning when we run out of ammunition. We didn't have any ammunition and we couldn't get any support to us. The Germans had knocked the bridge out behind us, so we couldn't withdraw on account of the river. About 10:30 that morning, our Major surrendered. I seen him when he came out with a white flag. I stayed on there in my fox hole where I was at. There was another boy dug in a fox hole about 15 feet from me. We had talked to each other about trying to get back across the river that night. That evening, right at about 5:30, we seen two Germans coming towards us. We were watching them and a shell come over and we ducked down in our fox holes. When we raised back up and looked back out to look for the Germans again, we didn't see them. That's when two Germans came up behind us and put their rifles on us and told us hands up!! That was what we had to do. They marched us on up there then to where they had a lot more Americans captured, and marched us on back that night. They put us in a building that night. I've always heard that there were 1,800 of us crossed the river and 1,200 of us killed or wounded, and 600 captured. I knew Fletcher had crossed the river that night, and I started looking for him. I found him that morning, and he said he was looking for me, too! Well, we got together right there, and we stayed together. The Germans started loading us on trucks, the next day, and moved us on further into Italy. When we were on the trucks moving out, American fighter planes came over and started strafing the convoy that we were in. They hit the truck that we were on and set it on fire. We had to get off of that. Then they loaded us on another truck and took us on and put us in a camp. A German major met us there, he could speak English. He told us, "I'm a soldier, you are soldiers. I'm cold, you are cold. I'm hungry, you are hungry. You cooperate with me, everything will be all right." We were hungry, because we hadn't had anything to eat for five days! We had got pretty weak in the knees. That night they gave us some cabbage soup, and hard tack crackers. The next morning, we got some more soup and crackers. We stayed there at this camp for about a week. Then they loaded us on a train and sent us into Germany. We were in box cars. Their box cars weren't as big as our box cars. We had to lay down side by side to sleep at night. They would stop at a little village or town and would give us soup. They would crack the door just a little bit on the box car. If you had something to get soup in, they would give you some. Some of the boys had their steel helmets. Fletcher and myself, we didn't have ours. They made me pull mine off when I was captured, but some of the boys still had theirs, and they would get soup, and we would pass the helmets around and drink the soup. We had a 5 gallon wooden keg on the box car we used for a bathroom.

How long did that trip take?

It took about three days. We stayed in the box cars the whole time. And I mean it was cold. There was snow on the ground and it was cold. We couldn't see out of the box car. Anyway, when we got to Germany, I think it was Falkensburg, I'm not sure on that main camp. We stayed there for a day or two. There the Germans would pick you out one at a time and question you. All they asked me was my name, rank, and serial number, and what religious denomination I was. I told them I was a Baptist. Fletcher said that was how they questioned him too. I think they probably questioned the high officers more, because they captured a lot of them. They moved 20 of us out of there to a farm to work. They called it a commando. When we got to this farm, they were

moving Russian prisoners out of the building they put us in. The Russians, some of them were leading the others, they were so weak and sick. They couldn't walk on their own. They told us we would be in the same shape when we left there. That was somewhere around the 1st of February, maybe the 5th of February that we arrived at this farm. The wooden bunks they had in the building had a straw mattress on them. They were full of fleas. We took all the mattresses outside and set fire to them, burned them up. The Germans wouldn't give us any more straw. We had to sleep on those wooden bunks for 13 months. They said we were sabotaging against the German government by burning the mattresses. We had to work there on the farm, picking up potatoes or planting potatoes, cutting firewood. We worked from daylight to dark, every day except Sunday, and a lot of Sundays we had to work.

What would a typical day be like?

Even in the summertime, it was fairly cool. We would be planting potatoes or picking up potatoes. A lot of times the weather would be foggy and cool. That was one reason they raised so many potatoes there, because it was cool, it was good for potatoes. About all they raised was potatoes and rye that they made that brown bread out of. They would come and get us about 6 o'clock every morning and get us up. They would give you time to eat breakfast, then they would come back around 7 o'clock to take you out to work. You would go out and work in the fields, then we would come in to the main house at the farm where the German inspector lived. There they would give us a bushel of potatoes every day if we needed a bushel. We didn't always need a bushel every day. They would give us 4 or 5 loaves of brown bread. We'd get this every day. We got Red Cross packages with margarine sometimes, then we could fry the potatoes. We made out pretty good. We got a Red Cross package between two of us. Fletcher Burks and myself would go together on the Red Cross package.

Could you write home or did you have any contact with home?

Well, you could write home. I still got some of the letters in there that I wrote home to my mother and dad. They could write back, but it was very little mail that I ever got from them. I don't know where it went. I've got a lot of letters there that my mother got back that were never delivered. I still got the telegram they got when I was reported missing. I don't think all the mail I sent from over there got through either. It was just certain things you could write. The Germans would check everything you wrote.

How often would you get the Red Cross packages?

Every week, between two of us we would get a 10 pound Red Cross package. It would have a half pound of cheese, a can of instant coffee, corned beef or Spam, raisins or prunes, a couple bars of chocolate candy or fruit bar candy. Sometimes you'd find 4 or 5 packs of cigarettes in there. Those cigarettes really helped us. You could take them and trade for eggs and stuff. The packages really helped us out. I don't think we could have made it without those packages. Well, we might have made it, but not near as well as we did. That's one thing I've always said...when I first came back, I used to help out the Red Cross some, some people say the money the Red Cross gets is used for something else, and doesn't go to where it should and so forth, but I've always kind of been for the Red Cross, because I know what the Red Cross out of Geneva, Switzerland did when we were prisoners over there. When I was in

service, before I got captured, you would hear a lot of boys say, "well I don't get anything from the Red Cross. They don't do anything for me." Well, when you're in the Army, you got what you need, you don't need anything. But when we were in prison, that's when we needed something bad, and that's when we got stuff from the Red Cross.

Did you do all your own cooking, besides the bread they gave you?

Yes. We had a wood stove in the building. It was a wood range, and it was a pretty good stove. The only problem was it would smoke sometime, it would smoke you out of the building if you didn't watch it. We had boiled potato soup all the time, fried potatoes.

Do you still like potatoes?

Oh yes, I still like potatoes. I could eat them three times a day! Potatoes are good. I don't get tired of potatoes. In the fields there, we would weed the potatoes, hill them, hoe them. The Germans would plow them out. They had a big plow there that would go down under the row and plow them potatoes out over the ground everywhere. Then we would have to pick them up. That was a big job, picking them up. We would load them on these big rubber tired wagons, then take them off the wagons and put them in kilns and cover them up with straw and dirt. We would come back in the winter time and grade them according to size. They had a grading machine that we would put the potatoes on screens, and the little ones would fall through, and the big ones would stay on top. Then we would load them back on the wagons and take them and put them on box cars and ship them on somewhere.

Would you be allowed breaks to rest in the fields?

They never did give us no formal break to rest. They would let you rest though. They wouldn't force us to work real hard. If you wanted to take time and smoke a cigarette you could. You just worked along steady. It was so long, such long hours. We would have our lunch in the fields. We'd take our sandwich with us. We would put margarine on the bread to make a sandwich and that was what we'd have mostly for lunch. That was what the German guards would have too, bread with margarine on it, just like we had. We would have one boy stay in the building and cook. We called him the cook. I can't think of his name. He would have the soup ready in the evening when we came in, potato soup! After we ate at night, if it was summertime, we would go outside before dark. We would play ball games. The Red Cross sent us footballs, base balls. We would go out on Sundays. They would take us over to a big field, and we'd go there and play football in pretty weather. Most of the time we stayed in the camp. We had one boy, from down here at South Boston, that was there in prison with us. He had a violin that the Red Cross gave him. He could really make music on that violin. There was a Smith boy from West Virginia. He could play a banjo. He got hold of stuff there, and made a pretty good banjo. They would saw on that fiddle and play on that banjo at night. It done us a lot of good, I think. I saw that fellow not long ago, Rufus Snead. I saw him a couple of years ago. I hadn't saw him for 38 or 40 years, since we had first come from over there. I've been keeping in touch with him since for the last few years. It was a chance meeting, I still recognized him. The way I run up on him, there is a boy here in Big Island, Bobby Brown. He had a daughter that worked in the hospital at South Boston.

The church she went to down there, she said there was a fellow who went named Rufus Snead who wanted to know if she knew a Elmer Branch from Big Island. My name is Elmer, but everybody calls me Jack. Well, she didn't know Elmer, she said she knew Jack Branch, but didn't know Elmer Branch. She came home and asked her dad if he knew an Elmer Branch. He told her yes, that's Jack. They just call him Jack, but Elmer is his name. That's the way I got to meet up with him again. Bobby Brown said we'd go down there and see him, he worked at a Post Office, I believe at Scottsburg, he was Postmaster there. So we went down to see him. Bobby and myself, we worked together at the Big Island paper mill. About three years ago, we went to see him. We went to the post office and Rufus Snead was in there. He recognized me, and I think I would recognized him anywhere too. We talked there for a right good while. I said something to him about that violin. I asked him if he still had it. He said, "yes, I've still got it. I've got it tuned for one thing, and I won't change that to nothing else." So we went back in his post office, and he got the violin out and he played it some. I told him, "that thing liked to worry us to death when we were over there in prison, you standing up and sawing on that thing every night." He said, "oh, I don't know, it might had a whole lot to do with us getting away from over there!!" It might have.

In the camp in Germany, did you go to church on a Sunday if you were off?

No we never did. There was a pretty church building in the town we were in there, but we never could go. A woman, a German civilian, told us that when Hitler came to power, he closed the churches and wouldn't let them go. Every body had to Heil Hitler! She was a good old woman, she seemed like a good person.

Earlier, you had told me that there were twenty prisoners that had set out for the farm, but that there were only 13 at the farm. What happened to the others?

Oh yes, there were 20 of us that went to the farm. We took a notion to try to escape one night. We took a fire poker and worked on the bars on the windows about all night. We got it out. We had been there just a couple of months when we did this. We got this bar out, and seven of the boys went out the window and on over the hill. Then this German civilian came to the building to split wood, and the rest of us had to stay in the building. Then the German guard came in about 6 o'clock and discovered that seven had gone. He chambered a bullet in his rifle and wanted to know where they went. We told him that they had went over the hill. We were all planning to go, but that civilian came out and we felt we couldn't leave after that. We got trapped in there. He messed it up. Where we fouled up was we ought to have left that bar almost out, and not shoved it. Then that night, we could all have got an early start and everybody gone together. What happened, we worked on the bar all night and didn't have time for all of us to get out. But we just got caught!!

Were there any other attempts on your part to escape?

We talked about escaping a lot. But really, we didn't know which way to go, if we got out. We didn't know what we'd run in to. When we would be out in a field working, if there was a patch of woods nearby, we would go there to the bathroom. We could have walked on off then, because the guard wouldn't go with you. We had one boy with us there, he left too. He was a Belgian. But he was

in the American Army. He told us that one of the times when he went to the bathroom from the field, that he wasn't going to come back. Sure enough, one day he left. They tried to catch him, and the guards told us they got him the same day over there in the town. He had gone to the town and asked them when the next train was coming through. He could speak their language, and he knew his way around over there. They got him though.

What would you do in the winter time?

We would cut firewood, get potatoes out of the kilns to grade them. Getting the firewood was just like getting firewood here. We would take axes and cross cut saws, saw trees down and work them up in firewood length. They would use the wood on the farm, and we would use it too. They used the wood to run some of the steam equipment, like tractors and things.

Any other stories come to mind?

Most of it was bad times, but there were some good times. I wouldn't want to go through all of it again. I remember one thing the Germans had us doing. They had us build them a house. They put up a forming for the house, about a foot wide, and they had us haul dirt in and put it in the forms. They would mix hog hair, old roots, and all kinds of stuff in the dirt, and we'd haul this clay and put it in the forms. We would use wooden mauls to chunk it down with. We were forming up walls for the house. Then they would put stucco on the clay walls. I remember on this one, when we pulled the forms off of it, it came a hard rain and it all just melted down. That was another time they accused us of sabotaging the government. They said we didn't pack the clay down hard enough. We did most of that in the winter time.

You said you spent just over a year there in the prison. Did you ever get used to it?

No, we never got used to it. One thing about it though, you thought about home a lot, and what would make you think about home more than anything else would be, some of the boys would get to talking about all the good food that would get fixed at home, what our mothers used to cook up; fired chicken and all that kind of stuff. We kept that kind of talk up all the time. I don't know if that was good to do or not!

Describe how you left that area and eventually came home?

We were out in the woods cutting firewood one day, and we heard artillery. We asked the guard what it was. They said it was German's practicing artillery. That went on for about a week. At night, we could see the flash from the guns. It was getting closer and closer. One evening, we came out from the woods and we could hear small arms fire in the village over from us. We asked the guards what that was, and they told us it was the Russians coming. They had to evacuate that town. Everybody had to be out that next morning at 7 o'clock. There was a German that lived right next to us that had been on the Russian front. He had one leg off. He gave us a lot of canned meat, pork chops, rabbit, that night. We cooked it up that night. He told us that if they asked us where we got it to tell them we stole it. About 9 o'clock, the guard came in the building, and we had all this meat cooked up. We told him we stole it. He said, "it don't make any difference to me where you got it." He sat down

and ate with us. The next morning, we started to march. That's when they started marching us. We marched all that day and they stopped us that evening in a camp. The next morning, they took us out to dig a ditch across a field. There was a town over from us, we could see the town. They said the ditch was for an air raid shelter, but we didn't know, we thought maybe it was for a defense line. We told them we wouldn't do it, that we weren't supposed to do that kind of work that would help the enemy. So we wouldn't dig the ditch. They took us on back to the camp that evening, and the next morning, they came to take us back out there. We told the guards we weren't going, but they put their rifles on us and told us that they had orders to take us back out there. So we went back to the field, but we still refused to work. That evening, a German captain told us that if we didn't work, they wouldn't give us anything to eat. We told him we weren't going to work, they didn't give us much to eat no way!! We told him we weren't supposed to dig a ditch or anything pertaining to the front line. He said, "yeah, the Russians are not supposed to bomb the town and kill all the children and women either, but they're doing it." A little later on, about 4:30, that was when they came in with two trucks with machine guns mounted on them. They put the machine guns on us and told us that if we didn't work, they would open fire on us. Well, something had to be done then. We moved around a little bit. One boy threw a shovel or two of dirt out of the ditch, and another one would throw it back in. We kept up that motion for about an hour, and then they took us back to the camp. Then we stayed on the road marching. We marched from the 8th of February to the 14th of April. We were liberated by the Americans then. One thing about along this road. Sometimes they would stop us at a little village along the way. They would give us some soup, the German Army was marching us. They had given us a little bit of meat along the way. Fletcher and I knew we had been eating some horse meat along, we weren't for sure, but it was some kind of meat. It was good. Anyway, back to one of those little towns where they were making soup. Fletcher walked around the back of one of the buildings. Fletcher came back around and told me, "if you don't believe we have been eating horse meat, you just come on with me." He took me around there and sure enough, they were making the soup with a horse hind quarter, it still had the shoe on the hoof!! We knew then that we were eating horse meat. It wasn't too bad. Pretty good meat.

Did you march every day from February 7th?

Yes we marched every day! There were 90 of us then, they had gathered up that many of us. But also, there were some Russian prisoners marching with us too. They were rougher on the Russians than they were on us. They didn't get much to eat, the Russians didn't. We wouldn't be in the same group as the Russians, but we would see them at different times. I have seen them go out and cut meat off horses and cows that had been killed in the bombing. They were hungry. The Germans raised a lot of carrots, but they never would give you any carrots to eat. I don't know why, but you never did get any carrots. Going along the road, if we seen a hill of potatoes, or some carrots, two or three of us would get out of ranks and get the carrots or the potatoes. They wouldn't bother you. Sometime, they would throw their rifle up like they were getting ready to shoot you, but they never did shoot any of us.

While you were marching, did you have a sense that it would be over soon?
Did you have any idea of what was going on around you?

Yes, we knew it was going to be over, but, that is what you had to sweat out. We sweated it out the whole time, from the time you was captured to when you were liberated. You always wondered what they were going to do with you. With the Russians closing in and the Americans coming in, you wondered if they were going to turn you over to the Russians or shoot you. We didn't know. That was what you had to sweat out. Something else while we were on this march that I've never been able to figure out, but I've always had my own idea about: We had boys on that march that got sick and fell out and couldn't go any further. The Germans that were with us, the Captain, he rode in a buggy, a horse and buggy. There were 36 German guards who marched with us. When an American prisoner would get sick or something happened where he couldn't go any further, they would leave him, they would just leave him. Most of the time one German guard would stay back there with him. We didn't have any trucks along with us. It wouldn't be long until that guard would be back with us. So my idea has always been that they just shot that soldier that couldn't walk any more, or left him laying there. They didn't have anything else to do with them. I believe they just got rid of them. We lost several on the march like that. They just gave out, couldn't go any further. There was a lot of body lice. I never did have any. I saw one on me after I was liberated. They would stop us some time on the march and give us a little break. I would see some of the boys pull their under shirts off and sit down to pick the body lice off. The boys that were in the camp with me, just the 13 of us, according to what Fletcher and some of the others told me, we never did have any lice. I think it was because we burnt up those old straw mattresses when we got there.

How did your liberation come about?

We were marching one night. We usually didn't march at night, but we were this night. We heard tanks behind us, we could hear them rumbling. It was army equipment moving. The Germans put us in a barn that night and told us to get up in the loft and lay low. They said they were withdrawing and the Russians were coming. They said if we got to moving around, that we would probably get shot. Some way or another the Russians by passed the little village we were in. They didn't come in there. The next morning, when we woke up, there weren't any German guards around, there wasn't anybody there. There was one German civilian in the area. The civilian had told us the night before that he had two shoats, and he said he would give us one of them, because he couldn't take them both with him. The civilians were evacuating in front of the Russians. The next morning, he wouldn't give us the shoat. He accused us of stealing 36 chickens that night. We did too. We got them and cooked them. Whenever we got the chance, we would get a chicken. A lot of times when they put us in barns to stay the night, we would kill and eat every chicken in there. Some of them boys would catch a chicken and ring his head off, and then we would go out back of the building and cook them. Anyway, the next morning at that barn, when everybody had left, a German captain came back with some guards. Some of the boys had just walked on off when they saw no one was around. We told this German captain that some of them had gone. He told us that we ought not do that, not to get off on our own, he said we might get shot. He said that if we stayed with him, he was going to take us to the American front that night. That is when Fletcher and myself decided that we would stay with him and see what would happen. They didn't want to give up to the Russians. They said the Russians was having no mercy on them, on nothing or nobody! That was the reason they were marching us out of the way of the Russians. Another thing the German guards did for us when we passed through

these little towns: Sometimes the civilians would come out with sandwiches and wanted to give us something to eat. But the guards wouldn't let us take it. They said it might be poisoned. They wouldn't let us take anything to eat from the civilians along the road like that. Sometimes when we would go through a town, a bunch of civilians would come out throwing rocks, bricks, anything they could get their hands on, throwing them at us. The guards would protect us from that too. They wouldn't let the civilians hurt us. Well, we started out marching that night when he was going to take us to the American front. We started marching toward rifle fire. We were coming to a pine thicket. Fletcher and myself had talked it over and said we were going to drop out when we got to the pine thicket, because the captain was turning away from the rifle fire we had been hearing. But before we got to the pine thicket, they put us in a camp. That was about 2 o'clock in the morning. We stayed there until daylight. The next morning at daylight, a Frenchman came down the road from Hanover. Well, Hanover had been declared an open city. There wasn't any fighting in it. It was bypassed. This Frenchman told us that the Americans were up there, and that they were coming down to that camp to get us. About 10 o'clock an American jeep and a weapons carrier came down the road. Our German guards started to run, and the Americans opened fire on them with a machine gun on the jeep. They just shot over their head, they didn't shoot them. The jeep rolled in there and the German captain saluted the American captain, handed him his gun, and told the German guards to hand their guns over to us. They had done changed captains on us. We had a German captain to begin with who was with us most all the way - he didn't have but one eye, we called him "One Eye" - he was mean. Just a day or two before we were liberated they took him away from us and gave us another captain, the one who took us to the front. He was pretty good to us. Anyway, about 10 o'clock when the American's came in there, they told us to start marching toward Hanover, that trucks would come to meet us and take us back. That was when they picked us up. Hanover was a nice town. They were bringing a lot of German prisoners into Hanover. The American captain asked us if any of us felt like it, they would like us to help guard German prisoners. He said his outfit had moved about 300 miles in the last two or three days, it was an armored division.

What kind of physical shape were you all in at that time?

We weren't in too good a shape then. Most all of us had diarrhea and were weak from the march. Fletcher Burks though went on guard duty that night. He told me the next morning that they brought in a truck load last night and the building had so many in it already that he didn't think they could get any more in. They brought in another truck load and asked him what to do with them. He said he told them to put them in the building with the rest of them. The tables had turned. We stayed there at Hanover two or three days then they flew us into France, loaded us on the boat and we came home. The boat trip took seven days. It was some kind of supply ship. The trip over had taken up 21 days on ship. Of course we were zigzagging and so forth to miss submarines then. We came in at Boston, Massachusetts. That was a happy time when we landed there. Me and Fletcher were together the whole time. We loaded on a train in Boston, I don't remember the next camp we stopped at, but that was where they let us send a telegram home. I still got the telegram I sent home. It was Fletcher's idea what we put on it. We put "it's a long ways from no man's land, but we made it home safe and sound." We put that on the telegram! We stayed at home for two months, and they sent us to Miami Beach, Florida. This was in July, the wrong time to go to Miami! We stayed down there two

weeks, Fletcher and I, in a motel room together. Orders came for Fletcher to report to Fort Meade, Maryland. We said, well, we done got separated now. So Fletcher shipped out. The next day, orders came in for me to report to Fort Meade, Maryland too! When I got there, I went in the barracks, and the first thing I seen was Fletcher sitting there on a bunk! He was sitting on the bottom bunk, so I just threw my stuff on the top bunk! We stayed together there then. I was working in a motor pool. The German war was over, but the Japs hadn't surrendered yet. The Germans surrendered the 7th of May when we were on the water coming back. They told us there at Fort Meade that they needed some soldiers to guard German prisoners. They had some at Front Royal and some at Lyndhurst, Virginia. They sent me up to Front Royal first. That's when me and Fletcher were separated. Fletcher could have gone, but he wanted to stay there and work in the motor pool. He liked vehicles. I stayed up at Front Royal for a day or two, then they sent me to Lyndhurst, I always called it up on the mountain from Waynesboro. They had 180 German prisoners up at the old CCC camp there. I stayed around there for a couple of weeks and didn't do anything. Finally the captain called me up one day and told me I was going to be Sergeant of the Guard starting first thing in the morning. He told me that he didn't want me to go and hurt any of these Germans for nothing. I told him that I wouldn't hurt them. The next morning I went down and went through the barracks getting the Germans out so I could count them and give report. I made them fall out three times that morning. I told them they were too slow getting out, go back in and try it again. The American captain came on down then, and I gave him report - all present. He told their interpreter, they had one interpreter, he told him that he was putting on a new Sergeant of the Guard. He said this fellow has been a prisoner for 15 months over in you all's country. He said, "I expect you had better snap to it!!" Well, I never did have any trouble with them.

Were there German officers and enlisted prisoners?

No, they were all enlisted men. We did just like they did, we wouldn't let the enlisted men stay with the officers. That was the first thing they did when they captured us was to take our officers away from us.

What was the make up of the American guard unit there?

We had a captain, regular army quartermaster, and 16 soldiers, a first sergeant and on down. I believe the buildings and all were the same as when it was a CCC camp. The only thing that had changed was there was a fence around the camp. The government had put a fence around it when they brought these prisoners over. There was a guard tower mounted at each of the four corners of the fence. It was a heavy woven wire fence. We would post a guard in each of the guard towers. We guarded 24 hours a day. When you turned off the highway, you come up a road and the fence was along the road there. There was a bar across the road.

What did the prisoners do there?

Civilians would come in and sign up for 10 or 12 at a time or how many they needed. Different farmers would come in. They would bring their own trucks to haul the prisoners. They would take them out and work them on a farm or apple orchard, chicken farm or whatever. A lot of them worked in apples. They would bring them back at night. That was my job as sergeant of the guard. About all

I had to do was to check the prisoners out to the civilians and check them in at night. All I had to worry about was the numbers, how many. We didn't keep track of them by name. One thing we had to make sure of was that when we checked them back in that they didn't bring anything back in with them. We was supposed to search them to make sure they had nothing extra.

Was the security really tight with the prisoners?

Yes, it was right tight!

What kind of shifts did you have to pull?

We had two different shifts. They were 12 hours. I would pull a 12 hour shift, from 6 until 6 [daylight], and then I would be off for three days. I would pull a day shift, be off three days, and then pull a night shift, and be off for three days. That's the way we worked it. We didn't have but four guards to post, one at each corner tower.

Did you have trucks there at the camp for transporting prisoners?

Yes we had trucks, but we didn't haul them around anywhere. Before I left there, they did take some, I don't remember how many, to the train, shipped them out back to Germany. Any of the soldiers that weren't on guard duty at the camp had to go guard them to the train.

Did the Army do the cooking for the prisoners?

Yes. It was pretty good food. They were fed just like the regular army. We would eat what the prisoners ate. They didn't get cabbage soup. They got whatever we got. If we got ice cream, they got ice cream.

When the civilians came to get the prisoners, would the prisoners take a lunch with them from camp?

I think the Army fed them their lunch.

Down at the Waynesboro Public Library, there is a local history room. They have a set of painted windows that look like stain glass windows. They are from the German prisoner of war chapel at Camp 8. Do you remember or know anything about these windows or the chapel there?

I remember something about that. I remember seeing them there, but I can't remember where they were located up there. I don't know why I waited so many years to go back over there to visit. I was only there for two months.

Did any of the prisoners stay in camp and work around the camp area?

Most of them would work around camp on anything there was to do. There might be 3 or 4 farmers come in there one day and maybe the next day nobody would come to get prisoners. The prisoners would just hang around if there was nothing to do.

Did the Forest Service ever come to get prisoners to do work in the National Forest?

I don't know. I don't ever remember seeing any Forest Service getting any. Most of them were local farmers.

Do you know if Sherando Lake Recreation Area was open at this time to the public?

I was there in December of '45. So it must not have been open then.

What would the prisoners do to occupy themselves if there was no work to do?

They had a place to play ball. There was a German barber, and he cut our hair too. He cut all the prisoners hair. I can't remember what all they did.

Do you remember them making their own music?

Yes they made music there. They had a kind of hall they could go to there. It was a building with a big room in it. I believe they used the same recreation hall that the CCC's had there. They had pool tables in it, and they made the music there. That was inside the fenced in area. We didn't get to go in there unless we had some reason to. We stayed in a separate area. We didn't associate with them at all. So I really don't know what all went on in the camp.

If you had Sergeant of the Guard day shift, what would be some of the things you would do?

Well, I didn't have to much to do with the prisoners, except check them in and out for work. I helped take care of the guarding, the posting of the guards, changing guards, and if anybody wanted to come in, we had a main gate. There was a guard on duty there at the main gate. If someone wanted to see the captain or somebody, the guard would call me to come and escort them in. I would call the captain and let him know what was going on. We had to watch to not let anybody in that wasn't supposed to come in. The Germans, they took care of themselves mostly. We didn't bother them too much. We didn't have that much for them to do there.

Were the prisoners friendly?

Oh, yes, they were friendly. A whole lot of them didn't want to go back to Germany.

Do you know why?

I believe it was because they knew they were getting treated better here than they were over there.

Did you ever talk with any of them?

Oh yes, they would talk to you. I didn't get to know any of them to well. I guess I wasn't really to interested in them at the time.

Was there a certain time for lights out in the evening?

Yes, it was around 9 or 10 o'clock.

When you had a three day pass, would you go home?

Yes, I would catch a ride to Waynesboro, and hitch hike a ride to Charlottesville and come down 29 to Big Island.

Can you think of anything from your experience as a guard there that stands out in your mind?

One thing I thought about a little bit: One day the captain called up to me and asked me to put on my full guard uniform and come down to the stockade. I didn't know what he wanted, it was on a Saturday evening. I wasn't on duty then. So I did and went down there. Two German prisoners had been fighting amongst themselves. Up on the hill there, we had a little place to put prisoners in if they had caused trouble. We called it the "Chicken Coop". We would put them up there and give them nothing but bread and water. It was like solitary confinement. The Coop had concrete walls about 4 feet wide and about 6 foot long. They were like stalls and we would put them in there.

Were these stalls already there when they made the camp a prison camp?

I don't know, but they were there when I got there. They had a roof over them. It was a regular building. Anyway, I took them up there that night. The captain told me to see what I could get out of them about the trouble, to find out what was going on. I never could get anything out of them. I could speak enough German to ask them questions. I reckon that's why the captain got me to do it. About 8 o'clock the captain came up, I took them up there about 4 o'clock in the evening, and he asked me how my prisoners were doing. It was cold, and I didn't have a fire, and I was about froze to death. I told him, "well, I guess they are doing as well as I am. I'm cold and they are cold too." He said, "well, I don't have anybody else to relieve you, so take them on back down there and put them in the stockade." I never did get anything out of them, and I tried every way I knew. They wouldn't tell me a thing.

When the civilians came in to get the prisoners to work, would they have to sign something taking responsibility for them?

They had to sign a form that they had so many. They were responsible to bring them back.

Did the prisoners earn any money for working for the civilians?

Yes, I don't remember what, but they got paid a little bit. The Germans paid us to when I was prisoner there. They gave us so many marks. We couldn't do anything with it. We used it for toilet paper. They had a canteen there at Camp 8. Cigarettes, candy, soda, that type of thing.

Would any of the farmers have certain ones they would ask for?

Yes. There was a whole lot of them that had certain ones they wanted. They would want certain ones, because they had trained them on what they wanted done. I couldn't always give them the same ones though. One reason was, we

didn't think it was fair to work just certain ones all the time, especially when we had that many there. It was my responsibility to try to spread out the work.

How come you left the duty there at Lyndhurst?

On December 3rd, 1945, I got orders to report to Fort Meade, Maryland for discharge. My time was up. I had the number of points I needed for discharge. The captain there at the prisoner camp, he called me to the orderly room, and told me, "Branch, if you stay on in this man's army, I will give you sergeants rating." I told him, "no I'm going home." I went on the Fort Meade, and was discharged on December 5th. I kept in contact with one of the boys there at Lyndhurst, Southard, he wrote me back that they were closing the camp on January 3rd, 1946. Why today is January 3rd, it was 45 years ago today that it closed.

I want to thank you very much for you time.

END OF INTERVIEW





BRANCH



ELMER NELSON
"JACK"
JUNE 25, 1924
JAN. 19, 2005



SARAH REYNOLDS
JULY 2, 1929
SEPT. 20, 2013

